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Consociationalism in the Low Countries: Comparing the Dutch and Belgian Experience

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Abstract: *Despite their geographical proximity, common history, and joint experience with social segmentation, there is a surprising dearth of studies systematically comparing consociationalism in Belgium and the Netherlands. This paper aims to help fill that lacuna by discussing the similarities and differences between the two countries in this respect. The similarities range from the time period of consociationalism, the original cleavage structure, to the existence of cross-pressures at the organizational level. The most important difference is that geography always played a bigger role in Belgium. This was true even before the politicization of the language divide, but it also explains why Belgium entered a new phase of consociationalism after depillarization and the Netherlands did not. Both countries currently face challenges by anti-establishment parties against the elite cartel, which raises questions whether this is not inherent to consociationalism once the original social segmentation has eroded.*

KEYWORDS: Belgium, The Netherlands, Social cleavages, Consociational Democracy, Federalism

'At first sight, so many centrifugal forces appear to be at work in Belgium, that her existence as a political unit seems paradoxical' (J.A. Goris, cited in Huyse 1970: 222-223)

'Theoretically your country cannot exist' (R.A. Dahl on the Netherlands, cited in Daalder 1989: 26)

An Obvious but Rare Comparison

Together with the 'high' countries of Austria and Switzerland, the 'Low Countries' – Belgium and the Netherlands - are seen as the four classic cases of consociational democracy in Europe (e.g. Lijphart 1977: 25-103; McRae 1974: 13): deeply divided societies in which the centrifugal forces were contained by political accommodation at the elite level. That both the Low Countries exist at all is a miracle if the two quotes on top of this article are to be believed. In view of the proximity of the two countries, their partially shared history, and the fact that a common language facilitates easy communication between Dutch and Flemish scholars (the study of Belgian conscociationalism has been a predominantly Flemish enterprise, but see for literature in French for example Piron and Verjans 2014; Seiler 1997), it is surprising that there are so few attempts at systematically comparing these two cases of consociationalism. In 1983, the first and so far only 'Belgian-Dutch Scholarly Meeting on Consociationalism' was held at Louvain, but the resulting special issue of *Acta Politica* (Van Schendelen 1984a), contains no comparative papers apart from a brief report on the meeting's discussions

(Huyse 1984: 159-160). The special issue includes a bibliography (161-175), indicating with one or two asterisks whether an entry reports on Dutch or on Belgium consociationalism: no entry has three asterisks! The occasional monograph on the politics of the Low Countries (e.g. Erk et al 2013; Weil 1970) deals with them separately, in sections or even chapters devoted to either country. There have been a few exceptions, dealing with aspects such as pillarization (e.g. Hellemans 1988; Post 1989; Wintle 2000), corporatism (e.g. Hemerijck and Visser 2000), the impact of Europeanization on consociationalism (Vollaard et al. 2015), or consociationalism as such (Keman 2008). This paper seeks to contribute to filling this lacuna by systematically comparing the Belgian and Dutch experiences with consociationalism.

In doing so, I shall focus on three aspects. Given the definition of consociationalism as social segmentation (the problem) combined with political accommodation (the solution), these two characteristics will be addressed first. Both the degree of segmentation (coinciding or cross-cutting social cleavages) and the nature of the cleavages (ideological or ethnic/linguistic) have been discussed in the literature as potentially affecting the seriousness of the threat to political stability (e.g. Barry 1975; Van Schendelen 1984b). Lijphart's four characteristics of elite accommodation (grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy and mutual veto) are generally accepted, but there has been some debate about the level to which they apply: the level of political systems, as Lijphart advocates, or that of individual issues or arenas (Halpern 1986: 192-193; Steiner 1981: 348). A third issue is the trajectory that Dutch and Belgian consociationalism have taken since the original social divisions have eroded. Originally, Lijphart warned against continued elite cooperation without segmentation (e.g. Lijphart 1968), but he changed his mind in later publications (e.g. Lijphart 2001).

The Same Problem?

The Nature of the Social Cleavages

With Luxembourg, the Low Countries were part of the Habsburg Empire as the Union of the Seventeen Provinces until well into the 16th century. During the Eighty Years War (1568-1648), the Northern provinces gained independence as the Republic of the Seven United Provinces – now the Kingdom of the Netherlands, leaving the Southern provinces under Habsburg, Napoleonic, and briefly even Dutch,[1] rule until achieving independence as the Kingdom of Belgium in 1830. The outcome of the Eighty Years War, concluded in the Treaty of Westphalia, turned both Low Countries into deeply divided polities. Had the border between the two countries coincided with the basin of the Rhine and Meuse rivers, the Netherlands would largely have been religiously homogeneous (i.e. Calvinist Protestant). And had the border coincided with the ancient Roman highway from Aachen in Germany to Bavai in Northern France, Belgium would have been linguistically homogeneous (i.e. francophone). But instead of the border between Rome and Reformation, or the border between Roman and Germanic languages, the exploits of the Dutch war of independence put the political border somewhere in between the two 'natural' borders, eventually creating two segmented countries (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 5-9).

[1] Formally, the Southern Netherlands did not come under Dutch rule, but it was perceived as such by many Belgian elites

However, this reading of the origins and nature of the segmentation in both countries is misleading for our purpose. First, the now dominant linguistic cleavage in Belgium has been slow to emerge. Well into the 20th century, French remained the language of the elites in both Wallonia and Flanders. When, after the Napoleonic period, the Congress of Vienna reunited the two Low Countries as a Kingdom under the Dutch William of Orange, the Belgian elites, and not just the Walloon elites, felt oppressed by the dominance of Dutch as the language of politics (among other things), and the union lasted only 15 years. Apart from a 'Flemish movement' in the 19th century, the language division became truly politicized only after the First World War, in which Flemish soldiers had been asked to fight for a state that communicated with them in a language that most of them did not understand. Even then, the linguistic cleavage only came into ascendancy as the other social cleavages eroded.

Second, despite the absence of a sizeable Protestant denomination, religion did constitute a social cleavage in Belgium, but it was between Roman Catholics who were loyal to the clergy on the one hand and more secular Liberals and Socialists on the other. And third, despite the existence of both Roman Catholics and two main varieties of Protestantism in the Netherlands, the religious cleavage was not so much between these denominations, as they mostly set their differences aside to present a united front against Liberals and Socialists, at least on matters related to religion (education, the suffrage, more recently abortion and euthanasia). This 'antithesis' distinguished, in the words of the Dutch Protestant leader Abraham Kuyper, those who believed in divine sovereignty from those who believed in popular sovereignty - much the same situation as in Belgium. And in both countries it was the issue of education (the freedom to set up religious schools and have them financed by the state) that galvanized the camps on either side of this divide. Finally, the social class cleavage divided both countries since industrialization. In Belgium this process started soon after independence and was initially concentrated primarily in the Walloon part of the country. The Netherlands remained a largely agricultural society until at least the First World War, which meant that many who came to work in Dutch mines and factories had already been mobilized by Christian Democratic parties and trade unions before Socialist organizations emerged. But other than these consequences of differential timing, the cleavages that gave rise to segmentation were similar in the two Low Countries, depriving us of an opportunity to compare the accommodation of different types of cleavages.

Coinciding or Crosscutting Cleavages

Around these social cleavages networks of organizations developed in both countries for education, housing, health care, sports, media, interest representation (for example trade unions), politics, etc., effectively locking the rank and file into tight subcultures and insulating them from outside influences. The term *'verzuiling'* in Dutch, 'pillarization' in English, was first employed by Dutch sociologists (e.g. Kruyt 1950), and is used in both countries to describe these conglomerates of subcultural organizations (in francophone Belgium the term 'familles spirituelles' was used). For Lijphart, first in his analysis of the Netherlands (Lijphart 1975), and later in his comparative work (e.g. Lijphart 1977), pillarization poses a threat to democratic stability. After all, democratic theory at that time argued that in case of cross-cutting cleavages, individuals are in contact with fellow citizens on the other side of cleavages, and these 'cross-pressures' supposedly have a moderating effect. The very fact that pillarization severely limits cross-cleavage contacts

removes this moderating effect. In Lijphart's account, when the pillar elites realized the risk of escalation of conflicts between the subcultures, they consciously designed an alternative to cross-pressures at the mass level: the cooperation at the elite level that constitutes the core of consociational democracy. Both the equation of pillarization with coinciding cleavages, and the realization of the risks by prudent elites, prompting them to cooperate (Lijphart's first 'self-denying prophecy') have been criticized by scholars in both Low Countries.

In his literature review that is considered one of the founding texts of consociational studies in Belgium, Huyse (1970), for example, argues that Dutch and Belgian pillarization were different. In Belgium, he suggests, there may not have been cross-pressures at the individual level, but they existed at the organizational level (also see Lorwin 1966). Socialist organizations, for example, defended both working class interests and secularism, and often had to weigh these two causes against each other. For the first, it would be logical to team up not only with the Liberal trade union, but also with the Christian labour union, but for the second, a coalition with Liberal rather than Christian organizations would be called for. The Liberals faced a similar dilemma. The situation was different for the Christian pillar, but they had to reconcile diverging socio-economic interests within their own network. Such organizational cross-pressures forced the pillars to moderate their positions. According to Huyse, consociationalism was called for mostly when issues that did not fit the cleavage structure arose, as such issues could not profit from the moderating forces mentioned above.

Huyse makes a valid point, but the same logic can also be applied to Dutch pillarization, where Socialists and Liberals had to make similar strategic choices, and where the Christian-Democrats also had to deal with class conflicts internally. The fact that in both countries there has been a cross-cutting cleavage at the mass level for Christian Democrats is already significant, but theoretically more important is the notion that the existence of more than one cleavage can have a moderating effect at the organizational level, as has likely been the case for the Socialists and Liberals in both the Low Countries. It reinforces the position of those who doubt that elite accommodation has been a reaction by prudent leaders to the threat of political instability caused by social segmentation.

The Sequence of Social Segmentation and Political Accommodation

Indeed, it has been called into question whether pillarization has ever posed a threat to democratic stability in the Netherlands. Most organizations that made up the Dutch pillars were created not before, but after the Great Pacification of 1917, the supposed starting point of a practice of elite accommodation. Deschouwer (1999: 76) comes to the same conclusion for Belgium: '(...) it is only after the initial accommodative agreement that the real institutionalization, or pillarization, of the subcultures took off'. With regard to the Low Countries at least, Lijphart seems to have found a solution for a problem that did not yet exist. According to Daalder (1966, 1989), elite accommodation was not so much the reaction of responsible elites to any acute threat, but rather the continuation of the elite culture of the confederal Dutch Republic of the Seven United Provinces. The pillars replaced the provinces, but an emphasis on autonomy for the constituent parts, and on bargaining and compromise to resolve differences between these parts has remained. The very term 'consociationalism' was introduced by the German scholar Althusius in his contemporary account of politics in the Dutch Republic. And it is interesting that the

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starting point of this new variety of old elite practices is called 'the Great Pacification', harking back to the Pacification of Ghent (1576), when the (then 17) provinces agreed to respect their religious differences and form a united front against the religious and administrative oppression by Spanish Habsburg. In fact, we might go back even further in Dutch history: elite accommodation, particularly in the socio-economic domain, is also known as 'the polder model' in the Netherlands, evoking an association with the 'water control boards' (*waterschappen)*, dating back to the 14th century, in which farmers did not compete, but cooperated to build and maintain the dikes that prevented all of them from being flooded.

However, this very different account of the link between consociationalism and pillarization is also not without weaknesses. It is undoubtedly true that pillarization accelerated only after the start of consociationalism in the Netherlands, but if we use a subcultural rather than an organizational definition of pillarization, the social segmentation was clearly visible before 1917. Deschouwer, having pointed out that pillarized organizations sprang up after the start of elite accommodation in Belgium, adds that Belgian accommodation still was a reaction to existing or potential conflict – a watered down version of Lijphart's self-denying prophecy.

Differential Pillarization

Even if the nature of the cleavage structure and segmentation, and the level of threat it posed to stability, may not have been very different in the two Low Countries, there have been significant differences. First, pillarization appears to have been relatively more institutionalized in the Netherlands. Wintle (2000: 147) comments on the closed, inward looking nature of the Dutch pillars compared to those in Belgium, which he attributes to the more emancipationist nature of the Dutch pillars. In Belgium, pillarization was, in Huyse's words, unfinished and unstable, vulnerable to new 'open' conflicts (Huyse 1970: 198-222). An important reason is the regional aspect of pillarization in Belgium. Given the different timing of industrialization in the North and South of Belgium, the Christian pillar was particularly strong and well-developed in Flanders, but had a much weaker and more loosely structured organization on the other side of the language border. For the Socialists this was the other way around. The fact that the Christian and the Socialist pillars had their strongholds in different parts of the country also meant that the language cleavage was not completely unrepresented in Belgian politics, even if its representation was indirect and informal. In the Netherlands, such a regional dimension is virtually absent: Catholics dominated the southern provinces of North Brabant and Limburg, but by the time pillarization developed many Catholics also lived in the provinces to the North. Similarly, orthodox Calvinism is particularly strong in a 'Bible belt' from the South-West to the East of the Netherlands, but that religion is by no means confined to that area.

There is one exception to the more complete pillarization of the social segments in the Netherlands. In both the Low Countries, the Liberal 'pillar' was weaker than its Christian and Socialist counterparts, but for the Netherlands the Liberals do not really qualify as a pillar. In the Netherlands Catholics, Protestants and Socialists build their organizational networks as part of a movement of emancipation against Liberal dominance. The Liberals never felt a similar urge to organize themselves, and they formed a residual category rather than a full-blown pillar; in Wintle's (2000: 142) aptly chosen words: 'it tended to be the place where those who could not be accommodated in the Calvinist, Catholic or Socialist

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pillars ended up, and in that sense might even be referred to as a pile or a heap rather than as a pillar'. In Belgium, by contrast, the Liberal pillar was still well organized, with formalized links between the Liberal party and other Liberal organizations (Deschouwer 1999: 86).

Similar Solution?

Pacification Equals Passification?

In both the Low Countries, elite accommodation of religious and class divisions can be observed from the end of the First World War to halfway through the 1960s. As mentioned above, Dutch consociationalism started with 'the Great Pacification' of 1917, a package deal that resolved the 'school struggle' (*schoolstrijd)* by granting the public financing of religious schools on an equal footing with the state schools, the conflict over universal suffrage by extending the franchise to all adult males, and introduced proportional representation, which ensured the political survival of the Liberals after the abolition of the *régime censitaire*. The starting point of Belgian consociationalism is generally regarded to be the 1918 'Pact of Loppem', an agreement between Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal politicians following negotiations chaired by King Albert I in a castle in West-Flanders (e.g. Gerard 2006: 887-895). The pact introduced universal and single male suffrage (a system of universal male suffrage in which some men had more votes had already been adopted in 1893), introduced measures towards equality for languages and trade unions, and led to a government in which all three pillar-parties were represented (the Delacroix I government).

There is also similarity in the 'rules of the game' that governed elite accommodation in both countries. Lijphart has famously listed a grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto as the four characteristics of consociationalism (Lijphart 1977: 25-47), and they can be found in Belgium and in the Netherlands. However, the list is longer, and slightly different in Lijphart's original analysis of Dutch consociationalist practices: a businesslike approach to politics; depoliticization of controversial issues; the government's right to govern with little interference from Parliament; secrecy, summit diplomacy; an agreement to disagree, and proportionality (Lijphart 1975). Many of these practices point to a top-down approach to politics. Consociationalism is cooperation rather than competition among the elites, and to cooperate successfully in a deeply divided society, the leaders of the various pillars needed some protection against the more radical elements of their own rank and file. Hence the importance of secrecy, and of a government somewhat aloof from daily political conflicts. The other side of this coin is that the rank and file allow their leaders sufficient room for maneuver: in his history of the Low Countries, Kossmann observed that 'the whole system depended on the political passivity of the people. Had the Catholic, Protestant, or Socialist masses insisted on their leaders fully implementing their doctrines and the principles on which *verzuiling* was based, there would not have been much room for the prevailing policy of compromise and cooperation' (Kossmann 1978: 574). Daalder (1964) has discussed Dutch consociational practices under the heading of 'leadership and apathy' (*'leiding en lijdelijkheid'),* and Huyse (1970) more or less stumbled upon consociationalism when he looked for an explanation for the 'passivity' of Belgian citizens. Hence his title '*passiviteit, pacificatie en verzuiling'* (apathy, pacification and pillarization). Pappalardo (1981: 380-382) lists 'elite predominance over a politically deferential and organizationally encapsulated following' as one of only two conditions that

can be regarded unambiguously as favourable to successful consociationalism. Nevertheless, its relevance seems somewhat understated in more comparative and theoretical accounts of consociationalism.

Structural Versus Intermittent Consociationalism

However, this is where the similarities between the two Low Countries end. The most important difference is that consociationalism has never been completely accepted in Belgium. This already applies to the very first agreement: what was the 'Pact of Loppem' for some was called the 'Coup de Loppem' by others. Moreover, this pact was only the first of several such agreements: '(...) in Belgium', writes Deschouwer (1999: 79), 'consociational structures and techniques have been adopted in waves. They were used to pacify only one problem at a time, leaving other cleavages subject to more competitive strategies of decision-making', that is, until those strategies produced another crisis. Consociationalism was not only used intermittently, but it also seems to have been used by a particular set of actors. In parliament, and to a lesser degree also in government, politics remained a competitive game, but whenever that game led to deadlock and crisis, not ministers or leading MPs, but the parties' presidents retired to one of Belgium's many chateaux to practice a more consociational style (e.g. De Winter et al 2000: 328). In the Netherlands, by contrast, elite cooperation seems to be a more structural aspect of political decision making. The 'Great Pacification of 1917' has been the only such pact, setting the tone for continuous consensus-seeking afterward. This difference between the two countries implies that Steiner's (1981) suggestion that consociationalism should be studied at the level of individual decisions rather than countries is particularly pertinent for Belgium, but less so for the Netherlands. It also means that the interpretation of elite accommodation as a prudent reaction to a threat to political stability finds more support in the Belgian than in the Dutch case.

What can explain this 'consociationalism-in-waves' in Belgium in contrast to 'consociationalism-as-a-daily-practice' in the Netherlands (also see Wintle 2000: 148-149)? Huyse (1970: 233) suggests that the Belgian parliament was a less suitable arena for national elite accommodation, because it is elected in multi-member districts, giving it a more regional than national focus. This implies that the daily practice of politics is not in the hands of consociationalists, and one could hardly keep the party chairs confined to a castle permanently. Second, we already discussed the less complete and less stable nature of the Belgian pillars, and this may also have been a factor making Belgian politics less predictable.

A third explanation would be the permanent temptation of majoritarian politics in Belgium: 'It is as if governments which perceived themselves as 'strong' tried to gain decisive advantages without much concern for consociationalism. Consociationalism reappears, however, when conflicts become so deep that they might destroy the political system and none of the conflicting actors is able to overcome his adversaries. The agreements are more the result of a stalemate than of a permanent spirit of compromise' (Frognier 1988a, also see Frognier 1988b). This is related to the nature of Belgian pillarization mentioned above: the notion that each segment forms a minority is more difficult to keep alive when one segment is dominant in Wallonia, and another segment is dominant in Flanders. This became most visible in the 1950s. A conflict arose over the return of King Leopold III after the Second World War. The King had stayed in Belgium during the Nazi occupation, and was accused of rather too cozy relations with the

occupation forces. Eventually, it was decided to put the 'Royal question' to the people in a referendum in 1950. There is a bit of a debate whether the referendum is a majoritarian or a consociational device. In Switzerland, the risk that a referendum might be called has been argued to make the parties all the more determined to find a compromise that is acceptable to all, thus preempting any party from mobilizing support for a referendum. In Belgium, however, the referendum had a very different effect. There was an overall majority in favour of the King's return, but in Wallonia and in Brussels there was a majority against. Violence broke out, three people were actually killed, and the King had to be persuaded, in spite of the referendum outcome, to abdicate in favour of his son Baudouin in 1951 (e.g. Deschouwer 2012: 38). This referendum also took place in a period (late 1940s and 1950s) in which both Christians and Socialists pursued majoritarian strategies. In 1950, the Christian party even obtained a parliamentary majority and formed a single-party government. Why the majoritarian temptation has been stronger in Belgium than in the Netherlands is not clear. Other than in Belgium, no political party ever commanded an overall majority in the Dutch parliament, but that cannot be the whole explanation. The three main Christian parties in the Netherlands (the Catholic KVP and the Protestant ARP and CHU) together had a parliamentary majority for the entire period of consociationalism (i.e. until 1967), and we already mentioned that they considered their differences as less important than their joint position on the religious dimension – in 1980 the three parties formally merged into the CDA. Yet, they have never seriously considered forming an exclusively Christian government when this was numerically possible. Perhaps they refrained from using their joint majority to avoid a backlash in the longer run against the concessions they had received (such as state support for their schools), but that merely begs the question why the Belgian Christian party did not fear a similar backlash when it formed a single-party government.

A further potential explanation is the fact that, in the Netherlands, all pillars shared a strong national identity. Even although the two solidly Catholic provinces in the South had been denied full provincial status during the Republic, and although there is some resentment there against the 'Hollanders' (i.e. the people in the dominant province of Holland, currently the provinces of North and South Holland), this never weakened the legitimacy of the polity. In the Northern province of Fryslân, the Frisian language is officially recognized, and a Frisian Nationalist Party does exist, but here too, being part of the Netherlands is not called into question. Originally, the situation was similar in Belgium, with a partial exception for the region around the city of Liège, which was a separate episcopal principality, and the short-lived joint Kingdom with the Netherlands (1850-1830) did much to reinforce a common Belgian identity. It was only in the early 20th century, and only in Flanders, that a 'Flemish national consciousness has progressively taken precedence over Belgian national feeling' (Stengers 1981: 57). As De Schryver put it in the same edited volume: '(...) in 1830 all the inhabitants proudly called themselves Belgians, even while speaking various languages. Later (...) "Belgian" became a family name, and "Fleming" or "Walloon" were added as given names. After World War II, the nomenclature was reversed. "Fleming" and "Walloon" gradually became last names, but all Belgians continued to bear the same Christian name, for that was the name of their common forefather one hundred and fifty years ago. The future will tell if new generations will bear the name "Belgian" as a first, second, or perhaps just a third name – a mere souvenir of historical consciousness' (De Schryver 1981: 31-32).

Similar Trajectories?

The Pace of Depillarization

From the 1960s, when the first signs of depillarization became visible in both the Low Countries, the trajectories have also been different. In both countries, religion and ideology had provided the glue that kept the pillarized networks intact. With 'the end of ideology' (and with secularization first) these networks started to disintegrate in the Netherlands (e.g. Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 46-49). However this erosion was much slower in Belgium because the pillars had also developed into service-providing organizations and clientelistic networks (e.g. Deschouwer 1999: 88). Whether by historical accident or by design, with the extension of the welfare state, the Belgian pillars also extended their reach. As an illustrative example: while the state distributes unemployment benefits in the Netherlands, the pillarized trade unions do so in Belgium (Deschouwer 2012: 211). Health insurance provides another illustration, as Belgian citizens have to join one of the pillarized health insurance organizations (*mutualité)* which reimburses them for the costs of health care (Deschouwer 2012: 210). In the Netherlands health insurance is provided by commercial organizations. Providing such services likely has slowed down the decline in membership of the parties and their auxiliary organizations in Belgium, at least in comparison to the Dutch case.

Party membership started to decline in the Netherlands with the onset of depillarization (i.e. well before the first point of measurement in Table 1), whereas in Belgium it was not until the 1990s that political parties saw a drop in membership figures. With trade union density rates the contrast is even sharper: Table 2 shows declining membership in the Netherlands and actual increases in membership in Belgium.

Table 1: Party Membership as a Percentage of the Electorate in Belgium and the Netherlands

	Belgium	Netherlands
1980	8.97	4.29
1989	9.15	3.19
1999	6.55	2.51
2008	5.52	2.48

Source: Van Biezen et al. (2012, Appendix Table 1).

Table 2: Trade Union Membership as a Percentage of the Workforce in Belgium and the Netherlands

	Belgium	Netherlands
1970	42.3	36.0
1980	56.6	32.4
1990	56.7	22.3
1995[a]	59.8	23.0

[a]1996 for the Netherlands
Source: Scruggs (2002: 277, Table 1).

The End of Consociationalism Versus Consociationalism 2.0

By far the most important difference between the two countries is not the pace of depillarization, but the fact that depillarization marked a (so far) permanent dealignment in the Netherlands, whereas in Belgium dealignment along the class and religious cleavages merely paved the way for a realignment along the language cleavage. In the Netherlands there has been speculation about realignment along the materialism/postmaterialism distinction, and more recently along the divide between multiculturalists and monoculturalists. Both issues, and particularly the latter one are important ideological dimensions, and some parties have sought to mobilize voters on the basis of these issues, e.g. D66 and the Green Left on postmaterialism, and Wilders' Party of Freedom on monoculturalism, but they have not developed into political cleavages comparable to class and religion before the 1960s (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 49-54). As a consequence, the Netherlands can no longer be classified as a consociationalist country. Yet, elite cooperation, at least between the established parties, continues, whether as a result of path dependency, or because cooperation is necessitated by the absence of a majority party. Thus the Netherlands post pillarization is best classified as a depoliticized democracy.

In Belgium, the language cleavage has always been there, gradually becoming more salient during the 20th century, waiting to be territorialized and politicized. The Dutch speaking majority was motivated by the historical injustices against their language: after independence French had been adopted as the only official language, and the recognition of the Dutch language had to be conquered in various domains, not least university education. The French speaking minority sought protection against the Dutch speaking majority, especially when economic power shifted in the second half of the 20th century from Wallonia, with its now outdated heavy industry, to Flanders, with the port of Antwerp and its petrochemical industries, and its modern service-based economy. The fears were opposite in the Brussels agglomeration: originally a Flemish city, it has become a predominantly francophone enclave in Flanders, with the towns and villages around Brussels gradually being frenchified: the 'Brussels oil stain'. French speakers emphasized the right to speak their own language, and Dutch speakers feared the French speaking majority. The various positions were first given voice by regionalist parties: for the French speakers the *Rassemblement Wallon* (1965) in Wallonia, and the *Front Démocratique des Francophones* (1968) in the Brussels area, and for the Dutch speakers the *Volksunie* (1954). These parties were electorally successful, especially in the 1970s, and participated in government. However, the established parties took some of the wind out of their sails when each of these parties split into a Dutch speaking and a French speaking party: the Christian party first (1968) and the Socialist party last (1978). New challengers, such as the Greens, also followed the example of having separate parties for the Dutch speaking and French speaking parts of the country. Each of the new parties only presents lists of candidates in electoral districts within its own region (and in Brussels). This political split provided a powerful impetus for the constitutional federalization of the country – the main item on the political agenda since the 1970s (e.g. Pilet et al. 2009).

Consociationalism entered a new phase in Belgium, and the old practices of elite accommodation were now used to deal with the linguistic tensions. As in the first phase, consociationalism is not a daily practice, but it surfaces at intervals. At the time of writing, the official reading (e.g.: https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/over-het-vlaams-parlement/geschiedenis/samenvatting-zes-staatshervormingen-een-handig-schema) has it that there have been six pacts to restructure the state (1970; 1980; 1988; 1993; 2001/2003; and 2011/

2012), but some of these package deals are made up of several consecutive agreements. The 2001/2003 state reform, for example, actually consists of three agreements: the Hermes-, Lambermont-, and Lombard-pacts. Moreover, the 1977 Egmont pact is not counted as one of the six because it was not implemented in the face of Flemish resistance. And the 1963 agreement to freeze the language border is regarded as a precursor and should perhaps be added to this list.

The four characteristics of consociationalism are easily recognized in what has emerged from these pacts, with a particularly strong emphasis on segmental autonomy. There are three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), and three (cultural) communities (Dutch speaking, French speaking, and German speaking), each with their own parliament and government, although matters are simplified somewhat because the Flemish have all but merged their region and community into a single institutional framework. Step by step, the Belgian national centre has been almost emptied of content by devolution to these regions and communities. The 1993 Saint Michael's Agreement formally turned Belgium into a federal state. However, because of the splitting of the political parties, the federal level has no autonomous role – it is not an actor in itself but a mere arena: in practice Belgium is more a confederation than a federation. Thus, consociational decision-making is primarily found at the federal level, and in Brussels. The requirement of government by grand coalition takes the form of rules that there must be parity between the two main language groups in government (with the exception of the Prime Minister), and that for some legislation a majority of MPs in both language groups is needed. An 'alarm bell procedure' provides for a mutual veto: if, before the final vote on a bill, at least three quarters of the MPs from a language group support a motion that the bill harms the interests of their language group, the vote is suspended, and the government (with its parity of ministers from the language groups) has 30 days to find a solution. These consociational rules were put in place in 1970 for the federal level, and in 1988 for the bilingual Brussels region. So far, the alarm bell procedure has been instigated twice at the federal level. Proportionality, of paramount importance in the past, probably is the least important of the four consociational characteristics in the current version of consociationalism. Proportional respresentation, almost a Belgian invention after all, remains in use as the electoral system at all levels, but with only two sides in the language conflict (the German minority is too small to play a role of its own), the Flemish camp will have a majority at the national level, and the francophones will have a majority in the Brussels region, even under proportionality. In that situation, parity is much more important than proportionality.

These consociational characteristics of the Belgian federation turn Belgium into what Deschouwer (e.g. 2005) has aptly labelled a case of 'consociational federalism'. It is this second episode of Belgian consociationalism that was lauded by Lijphart (1981: 1): 'Belgium can legitimately claim to be the most thorough example of consociational democracy'; 'it provides a complete empirical example of the consociational alternative to majoritarian democracy' (Lijphart 1981: 8; also see Seiler 1997). Others, however, have also pointed to the tensions that are inherent to this combination of federalism and consociationalism (e.g. Piron and Verjans 2014; Sinardet 2011). Lijphart was still optimistic about the future of Belgian consociationalism: writing after only two of the six state reforms, he argued that 'there are good reasons to think that consociationalism will remain successful in the long run' (Lijphart 1981: 10). To a large extent Lijphart's optimism has proven warranted: the elites have continued to resolve crises between the two language communities, and Belgium still exists! However, keeping the country

together has become increasingly difficult. To coordinate all the governments in Belgium (federal, Flemish, Walloon region, French community, Brussels, German community) a Concertation Committee is provided for, but in practice it falls to the governments themselves. Such inter-governmental coordination is easiest if the governing coalitions at all levels are congruent and symmetrical, for example if the coalitions in all regions and communities are made up of the Christian and Socialist parties at that level, and if the federal coalition then includes both the Flemish and francophone Christian and Socialist parties. Given the different political landscapes in Flanders and Wallonia this is already very difficult (a given combination of parties that has a majority in Wallonia may not have a majority in Flanders, etc.), but after the decoupling of the elections in 2003, elections held at different moments further diminish the chances that congruent and symmetrical coalitions can be formed. In 2017, for example, the Liberal MR was the only francophone party in the federal government and all six governments were differently composed. The Walloon region, for example, was governed by Christians and Liberals, but the francophone community by Christians and Socialists.

Even more problematic is that, due to the language split in the party system, electoral competition takes place only within Flanders and within Wallonia. At that level the parties (and the Flemish parties in particular) campaign with promises to get more powers transferred from the federal to the regional government. This turns federalization into a never-ending project, but at this stage there is not much left anymore to be transferred (e.g. Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015; Deschouwer 2005). This leaves splitting the country as the only logical end state, and the largest Flemish party, the regionalist N-VA (successor to the *Volksunie)* is already committed to that goal. However, given the problem of the capital Brussels – a largely French speaking enclave in Flanders, splitting the country is easier said than done.

The Vulnerability of Depoliticized Democracy

Such an existential threat to the polity is completely absent in the Netherlands, but both the Low Countries share another challenge that is intricately linked to consociationalism itself. The essence of consociationalism is the replacement, in a divided country, of competition at the elite level with political cooperation. This effectively deprives the citizens of a meaningful choice between political parties, as the parties will cooperate after the elections anyway. As long as there is a clear need for this cooperation, that is: as long as society is deeply divided, the absence of choice is not acutely felt. After all, a secular working class voter would not seriously consider voting for a Catholic party anyway, etc. But as soon as the cleavages had eroded and depillarization was well on its way, the absence of choice became more than a problem for democratic theory. Writing in 2008, Keman argues that with some delay, depillarization led to more competitive elite behaviour: 'Instead of *coalescence* as the main pattern of political behaviour, the name of the game appeared to be developing into political *confrontation* at elections, leading to change in the party system and within government' (Keman 2008: 208). While the evidence he cites in support of this conclusion is uncontested (rising electoral volatility, the emergence of new parties, changes in the composition of governing coalitions, and the ascendancy of new political issues such as immigration, welfare retrenchment and European integration), this does not automatically imply of a shift from accommodation to confrontation. In both the Low Countries, an increase in electoral volatility signaled that voters started to choose, but the political elites continued to cooperate, if only

because the changes did not affect the minority status of all parties. Consociationalism only ended because one part of the definition – social segmentation – disappeared, not because elite accommodation stopped. Even worse: with depillarization also came a de-ideologization, which considerably reduced the differences between the established pillar-parties. As Koole and Daalder observed for the Netherlands: 'the present atmosphere differs from that of the days of pillarization in that it is due to converging visions on many political issues rather than to negotiations among political elites despite their initial differences in principle. One could say, in somewhat exaggerated terms: compromises then, consensus now.' (Koole and Daalder 2002: 39).

Today, Lijphart sees consensus democracy as superior to majoritarian democracy, regardless of whether society is segmented or not, but in his early work on consociationalism, he explicitly warned against a 'depoliticized' or, in Dutch publications: a cartel democracy: elite accommodation without social segmentation. He predicted that, deprived of a choice within the system, citizens eventually will choose against the system (e.g. Andeweg 2001; Lijphart 1968). As Deschouwer (2012: 10) put it, writing about Belgium: 'The consociational democracy has been transformed into a 'depoliticized' or 'cartel' democracy, where the practices of consociational democracy are continued in a society that no longer needs these pacifying and protecting devices. A depoliticized democracy is likely to be challenged, to be questioned for its lack of debate and flexibility, for its lack of performance. Political movements criticizing the principle of consociational power sharing, with its blatant lack of alternation in power, might find fertile ground in old consociational democracies. (...) Belgium is – like Austria and the Netherlands – another place where we can observe this type of challenge to the very heart of the system'. Writing in the late 1960s, Lijphart expected that the radical Left would profit from this anti-system sentiment, but in reality the populist Right has been the main beneficiary in former consociational democracies such as Belgium and the Netherlands. In Belgium the main party of the populist Right, *Vlaams Blok,* was founded in 1978 (relaunched as *Vlaams Belang* in 2004) in reaction to one of the consociational pacts. In the Netherlands, the first populist Right party, *List Pim Fortuyn,* was founded in 2002, in opposition to the 'purple coalition', a coalition of the former class enemies the Socialists and Liberals – epitomizing consensus government. After the assassination of its leader in 2002, the party was in disarray and eventually disbanded, but it has been replaced by Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)* and more recently also by *Forum voor Democratie*. The extent to which populist Right parties are anti-system is debatable, but their core characteristic – perceiving a distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elites – clearly defines them as anti-consociationalist. Obviously, the success of the populist Right cannot be attributed solely to anti-cartel sentiments. Anxiety about a multicultural dilution of the 'pure people' also plays an important role in both countries, with the qualification that in Belgium Rightwing populism is much stronger in Flanders, with only a few very small parties, such as the *Front National* (since 2012 *Démocratie Nationale*) in Wallonia. Moreover, the populist challenge is not confined to post-consociational countries, as Lijphart points out (Bogaards 2015: 89; Lijphart 2001: 135). Nevertheless, there is a clear correlation between consociational or consensus democracy and the strength of populist parties (Andeweg 2001; Hakhverdian and Koops 2007).

One might object that with regard to the populist challenge Belgium is treated as a post-consociational democracy whereas the previous section has argued that Belgium transformed into a second phase of consociationalism. In fact, both are true, but at different levels and with regard to different cleavages. At the federal level elite

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accommodation of the language division qualifies Belgium as a consociational system still. Because of the split of the Belgian party system, party competition takes place only within Flanders and within Wallonia. Within those regions no cleavage needs to be accommodated: the class and religious cleavages are no longer salient, and the regions are linguistically homogeneous, with Brussels as a notable exception. As a consequence, Belgium also qualifies as a depoliticized democracy at the regional level.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Belgium and the Netherlands have adopted, at least initially, very different strategies to deal with the populist challenge (e.g. Andeweg et al. 2008). In 1989 all other Belgian parties excluded the *Vlaams Blok* from government participation, while in the Netherlands, the *List Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) was immediately included into the governing coalition. The new and leaderless party proved too divided internally to govern, the government disbanded after only 87 days, and the LPF eventually disappeared. In 2010, the strategy of inclusion was used again to deal with the PVV. The Rutte I government (2010-2012) included ministers from the Christian-Democratic and conservative-liberal parties alone, but the PVV was included in the coalition, a special coalition agreement spelled out the three-party agreement, and PVV leader Wilders joined the intra-coalition coordination meetings. This coalition ended prematurely when the PVV left the coalition in a disagreement over austerity measures.

In Conclusion

It is impossible to do full justice to all the nuances of the consociational experience in the Low Countries in a short paper, but even this relatively crude comparison between the two countries reveals a number of differences, but also some relevant similarities – relevant in the sense that they highlight questions to consociational theory that warrant further exploration. Table 3 summarizes the main findings of our comparison of Belgium and the Netherlands with regard to the problem (segmentation), its solution (elite cooperation), and the trajectory since depillarization.

If we could have compared Dutch consociationalism based on class and religious divisions with Belgian consociationalism based on the language cleavage, we would have been a step closer to analyzing the impact of the nature of the cleavages on elite

Table 3: Relevant Similarities and Differences Between Belgian and Dutch Consociationalism

	relevant similarities	*differences*
the problem	Similar cleavages to start with Existence of moderating cross-pressures at the organizational level Pillarization came after, not before elite cooperation	Pillarization more complete and more institutionalized in NL than in B
the solution	Important role of citizen passivity	Elite cooperation structural in NL, intermittent in B
the trajectory	Vulnerability to populist challenge to depoliticized democracy (elite cooperation without social segmentation)	Depillarization slower and less complete in B than in NL Transition to new form of consociationalism based on language divide in B; dealignment in NL

cooperation. However, this was not to be. Originally, the Belgian language cleavage was a latent conflict and the divisions in Belgian and Dutch society were quite similar. By the time Belgian consociationalism was adapted to deal with the language division, the original cleavages in the Netherlands were all but erased without being replaced. This is not to say that the conflict between Dutch and French speakers in Belgium was irrelevant between the end of World War I and the 1960s, but its main effect was an asymmetrical and less stable pillarization as the Socialist and Christian segments were strongest in different regions of the country.

Consociationalism is sometimes defined as a reaction to coinciding (and thus mutually reinforcing) social cleavages, rather than cross-cutting cleavages (with the resulting cross-pressures having a moderating effect). It has always been clear that the Christian pillar formed an exception. It straddled the class cleavage, resulting in contacts between working class and middle class church members. But the literature on Belgium and the Netherlands has drawn attention to the fact that moderating cross-pressures may not only exist at the mass level, but can also be found at the organizational level, where the leaders of Socialist and Liberal organizations had to weigh the pros and cons of cooperation with either each other, or with their Christian counterparts. Whether similar cross-pressures can be found in other consociational countries and the extent to which cross-pressures at the organizational level indeed have the presumed moderating effect are important questions for consociational theory.

The fact that in both the Low Countries pillarization developed or at least accelerated after, not before, the start of elite cooperation (in both countries at the end of World War I, is of great importance for the debate about the origins of consociationalism: a 'self-denying prophecy' in which prudent elites preempt a destabilization of democracy by social divisions or an elite culture of compromise and cooperation that has its own causes (history, absence of a majority, etc.) unrelated to social developments. It would be too simple to interpret the evidence from the Low Countries as a falsification of the 'self denying prophecy' hypothesis. Pillarization may have developed after 1918, but pillarization is not the same thing as segmentation. To the extent that we can determine developments in society in those years, it seems likely that the social cleavages and the resulting segmentation of Dutch and Belgian society were already visible before the Great Pacification and the Pact of Loppem. In Belgium more than in the Netherlands there have been several crises (the 'Royal Question', the 'Great Strike', the 'Education War') that prompted elite accommodation to prevent further escalation of the conflict. Of course, this interpretation begs the question why pillarization developed at all. Lijphart argues that setting up pillarized organizations was actually a strategy to prevent conflicts from resurfacing: good fences make good neighbours: 'It is in the nature of consociational democracy, at least initially, to make plural societies more thoroughly plural. Its approach is not to abolish or weaken segmental cleavages but to recognize them explicitly and to turn the segments into constructive elements of stable democracy' (Lijphart 1977: 42). However, pillarization may have served another purpose as well: protecting the leadership of a social segment against internal criticism of their accommodationist behaviour by encapsulating the rank and file in organizations under their control. This interpretation of pillarization as an instrument of social control clearly fits with the passivity of citizens that has struck observers of consociationalism in both the Low Countries.

For the current political situation in both countries the finding that both are challenged by populist parties, and my hypothesis that this is at least partially caused by continued elite cooperation despite the disappearance of the original divisions, is of particular

relevance. The implicit warning that if voters are denied a meaningful choice within the system, they will vote against the system applies to all political systems, but post-consociationalist systems seem particularly vulnerable in this respect.

Thus, this paired comparison yields several questions for a new research agenda on consociationalism. To that agenda we may add some of the findings listed in table 3 that still defy explanation. Why, for example, did Belgian pillars adopt a service providing or even clientelistic function to replace the ideology that had held the pillars together previously, or the other way around, why did Dutch pillars not avail themselves of that alternative organizational 'glue' and why did the few Dutch pillar organizations that also provided services (housing, health care) deemphasize their pillarized background and aim to professionalize or even commercialize instead? And even more fundamentally, why was elite accommodation in the Netherlands rather institutionalized, and a permanent fixture of elite culture, whereas in Belgium it had the nature of ad hoc crisis resolution, with periods of more competitive, or even majoritarian, politics in between? I rejected the hypothesis that, other than in the Netherlands, the Belgian Christians and Socialists enjoyed, or were very close to, a majority, as the three Dutch Christian parties that later formed CDA had a majority throughout the period of pillarization. Perhaps the fact that a national identity was strong in the Netherlands but weak in Belgium has played a role, but that is merely a conjecture at this stage. All we can say on the basis of this comparison is that very different forms of social segmentation and elite cooperation can be found under the umbrella of consociational democracy, and that in itself is worthy of further analysis.

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